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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 003319

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SUBJECT: ROSALES CAMPAIGN ON THE MARCH

REF: CARACAS 003069

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,  
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. While he still faces an uphill struggle to defeat President Chavez' electoral machine, consensus opposition candidate Manuel Rosales continues to campaign hard and intelligently. Rosales' November 4 city-wide Caracas march attracted several hundred thousand participants and his November 5 rally in Barquisimeto attracted dozens of thousands, according to local press reports -- both impressive turnouts. Rosales is also capitalizing on the opposition's November 2 release of a video showing Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez telling a large group of PDVSA managers that they would be fired if they did not support President Chavez' re-election. Rosales appears to be generating additional -- and much-needed -- political momentum going into the final month of the presidential campaign. End Summary.

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"We Are 26 Million"  
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12. (SBU) Opposition candidate Manuel Rosales led a massive November 4 march through major Caracas neighborhoods. Estimates range from 300,000 to 700,000 marchers; certainly there were several hundred thousand participants. Marchers embarked from both the eastern (richer) and western (poorer) sections of the Venezuelan capital and converged several hours later in the eastern working class neighborhood of Petare. Rosales both walked and rode in an open vehicle during the festive "26 Kilometers for 26 million Venezuelans" rally. Countering President Chavez' goal of garnering 10 million votes, participants chanted Rosales' unifying message: "No somos diez, Somos veinti-seis!" ("We aren't 10, We're 26!"). Local municipalities assigned some 3000 personnel to provide security for the march and there were no reports of political violence. Rosales' supporters did complain that the Petare Metro was mysteriously closed at the end of the march, however.

13. (C) Baruta Mayor Henrique Capriles Radonski, of the opposition Primero Justicia party, told PolCouns November 6 that he was very satisfied with Rosales' November 4 Caracas march and increasingly optimistic about Rosales' electoral prospects. Capriles said he believed the march was even bigger than Rosales' October 7 "Avalanche" rally in central Caracas (Reftel) and gives the Rosales campaign some

political momentum. Capriles also asserted that Chavez' campaign appearances in Caracas are generating surprisingly small crowds. Referring to some recent public opinion polls that show Rosales still trailing Chavez by 15 to 20 percentage points, Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez told reporters that the Caracas march reflects a "real poll."

¶4. (SBU) Rosales reportedly spoke to approximately 70,000 at a November 5 rally in Barquisimeto, Lara State. During his stump speech, Rosales pitched his debit card ("Mi Negra") scheme for redistribution of oil revenues and announced a plan to guarantee broader access to universities ("Instead of wars, computers"). Countering Chavez' December 4 accusations that the opposition is preparing a "destabilization" campaign, Rosales said "we do not have cards up our sleeves, but if (the government) commits fraud, we will activate a plan to put people in the streets." Rosales also told the crowd that he has solicited a meeting with senior military officials to discuss the upcoming election and the "transition" (should he win).

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Appealing to Government Workers  
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¶5. (SBU) Gerardo Blyde, a prominent Primero Justicia politician on Rosales' central campaign committee, released to the press on November 3 a video of Minister of Energy and Oil Minister Rafael Ramirez, taken surreptitiously, telling a large audience of state oil company PDVSA managers that the "new PDVSA must be "red (i.e., pro-Chavez) from top to bottom." Noting that PDVSA employees need to do "all that we can" for "maximum leader of the revolution" Chavez, Ramirez said that if anyone felt uncomfortable with that policy, then that employee should give up his or her position to a "bolivarian."

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¶6. (SBU) The Rosales campaign has forwarded the video to the National Electoral Council and is asking that Ramirez be sanctioned for politicizing PDVSA and using his position to advance Chavez' re-election campaign. Blyde is also preparing a complaint for the Attorney General's office. Remarkably -- given this red-handed violation of legal and constitutional prohibitions against politicizing state employees -- President Chavez actually endorsed Ramirez' intervention with the PDVSA workers, and called on him to repeat it.

¶7. (SBU) On the margins of the November 4 Caracas march, Rosales assured Venezuela's government workers that should he be elected, he would issue a "no dismissal" order to protect public employees and replace only the political leadership of government ministries. Rosales reiterated the promise during his November 5 campaign speech in Barquisimeto. He also pledged to reinitiate a dialogue with unions to improve working conditions and to address the ongoing problem of collective bargaining agreements awaiting government approval in both the public and private sectors.

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Comment  
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¶8. (C) Rosales has been running a smart and credible campaign, but even his campaign team privately concedes that he has not yet reached an electoral "tipping point" against President Chavez and his well-financed electoral machine. Nevertheless, Rosales' and his team's ability to mobilize impressively large numbers of supporters could help persuade many potential Rosales supporters to vote on December 3, rather than abstain. In addition, the Rosales' campaign team believes that Rosales' growing "street power," combined with an elaborate opposition ballot-watching program, is needed to try to deter the Chavez government from committing electoral

fraud. While they are understandably loathe to discuss defeat scenarios, Rosales' supporters also anticipate that the Zulia governor's growing "street power" could serve as a potential foundation for a more effective, country-wide democratic opposition and a "brake" against Chavez, should the Venezuelan president, as expected, win re-election.

BROWNFIELD